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Name of the Game

Will's best friend at Korat Air Base is a guy named Gordon Rogoff. The other guys call him *Rog* sometimes—like *rogue*—but usually it's just Rogoff. Will isn't sure why he likes Rogoff. The guy couldn't be more different from himself. Rogoff has a college degree, for starters. Not only that, but he majored in classics, slogging through both Greek and Latin, before he chucked it and joined the Air Force. "Best move I ever made," he tells them, stopping to swig from his beer. Will, whose hooch is across from Rog's, knows the guy has a stack of Latin and Greek books on the table by his bed. They're paperbacks, but still. Not many guys drag books halfway around the world just to see them bloom with mildew in the Thai jungle. Rogoff is probably the only guy in the war who can recite dirty poetry in Latin and recount Hannibal's attempt on Rome.

"Hannibal's problem was not unlike ours," he tells them. "He took stock of the enemy just fine. But he failed to factor in the god-damned *weather*."

Will arrived at Korat in July, 1967. In August, Washington declared Hanoi no longer off limits for bombing runs. Now they fly almost daily into the most heavily defended airspace in the world. Weather stops their bombing runs more often than anti-aircraft fire. But weather they're used to. What's new is flying through a sky so full of flak there isn't time to think. You dive in, drop your load, and head for the hills.

"One pass, haul ass," Will's wing commander told him his first time into Hanoi. "That's the name of the game."

On average they lose about one guy a week. When you step out over Hanoi, you take a deep breath and hope for the best. Nobody's coming in after you. There's a saying around the base for rescue operations in Route Pack Six. *Ain't no way*.

"Okay," Johnson is saying. "I've got a good one." He's a tall, loosely jointed guy who seems like he should be shy, but isn't. Instead, others shift nervously when he speaks, embarrassed in his stead.

"I'm fifteen years old. I've got this horse." There's a collective groan.

"Shit, not another dead pet," someone says.

Johnson is unfazed. "So it's summer in Oklahoma and I'm riding this horse out to check on a fence. And I see up ahead something lying on the ground. When I get closer, I see it's one of the cows."

The game was Rogoff's idea. He says it's called *Ad Misericordia*. Whenever they lose a guy, they gather and drink bourbon together, sort of an informal wake. But it made them fidgety and morose to sit around staring into their glasses, so they began to invent distractions, games. They started off with cards. Then one night Rogoff had a new idea. The challenge would be to tell a story *ad misericordia*. It means *for sympathy*, he explained. Each guy would have to tell a story that got the audience's sympathy. The best story would win an extra round. Those who failed to win sympathy would pick up the tab.

They started that night. The wing commander, Baz, won with a story about watching his cousin slip off a dock, cracking his skull on the way down. The kid was never the same again, Baz said, and he always felt guilty for standing there, for not being able to prevent the accident from happening.

Now *Ad Misericordia* is part of their routine wake. Tonight's is for Reggie McPhee, a tall skinny guy with a wife and twins back home. "See you after the war," were the last words he said. They heard his siren wailing desolately all the way down but when they tried to contact him on the ground, they got nothing. "McPhee," Will said several times, violating protocol by using his name. "If you can hear me, turn your radio off and on." Nothing. After a few passes, the flak got thick and they had to get the hell out.

Johnson finishes his story. In the end, he winds up shooting his own horse's leg by mistake and being forced to finish it off. No one can resist this ending, even though they're all sick of dead animal stories. Johnson is declared a success.

Will is next. He has yet to win, or even to succeed at getting sympathy, and his share of the bar tabs is adding up. Somehow, he can't bring himself to play the game in earnest. He clears his throat.

"I've just arrived at Nellis for fighter training," he begins, reluctant to the last. "And the first guy I see is this instructor from my old base who hates me."

There's a wild beauty to Vietnam. After refueling over Laos they fly in over the deck, jungle thick and moist as an animal. Further south there's farmland, miles of light green rice paddies with flashes of water dark as chocolate glinting up in the sun. East of Hanoi the ocean is jewel blue, punctuated with strange, barren islands like giant boulders floating in the sea. Clouds and fog roll in quickly, as if manufactured, just one more thing launched against them, along with the MiGs, the SAMs, the flak from anti-aircraft guns. Avoiding that mess, Will sometimes flies upside down, looking up to see the ground. Its beauty is a strange backdrop to terror.

One thing he knows for sure: pilots have it better than grunts. Guys on the ground spend their days slogging through undergrowth thick with heat and snakes, in constant fear of an ambush. For pilots the terror is concentrated in the two hours flying from Thailand and the one crazy, adrenaline-skewed hour jinking and dodging in a sky full of shrapnel and smoke. If you survive that, you're bright and shiny for another day, heading home for dinner and Jim Beam and a bed that isn't the Hilton, but is better than the hard ground.

Will's hooch, like most guys', has photos from home taped on the wall over his bed. One framed photo sits on his bedside table. It's a picture of Carol holding a small, brown creature with a frowning face and a tiny fist raised as if in defiance—Margaret, born that August. He has never seen her. Every night he picks up the picture and looks at it for a long time. No matter how long he stares at it, she remains a mysterious creature, part of another world, no more than an idea to him here.

"So my mother turns to me and says 'You've got the letter from your brother, right?'"

Julep Schneider is on the spot. He's already won once, with a story about his sister's death from cancer, and now he's trying to bring an edge of misery to a story that might otherwise be funny. The others listen, fascinated to see if he'll pull it off.

"Of course I don't. But I nod. 'Let's see it,' she says. So I reach into my jacket pocket and pull out the first thing handy. I hold it up, and it looks like that's gonna satisfy her."

A couple guys chuckle, anticipating the screw-up. Julep is a southerner with a heavy drawl, which is how he got his nickname. He's good at telling stories. He doesn't pause and grope for words the way

Will does when he speaks. He recognized his father's Midwestern reticence, his farmer's suspicion of words, in his own tales. He has already told his tonight, a quick recounting of how his father refused to come to his high school graduation after hearing that Will signed up for the Air Force. It was a betrayal, leaving the farm.

"But then she grabs the letter to look at it, and I realize it's the wrong one."

"What was it, Julie-boy?" someone shouts, and Julep tries to keep a smirk from his own face.

"It was a letter from my girlfriend," he says. "She was freaking out because she thought she might be pregnant." He pauses to let everyone laugh a bit. "My mom goes ballistic of course. She starts shouting and whacking me with the letter." More laughter as everyone envisions the scene. Will raises his hand to the Thai serving girl. He puts his thumb and first finger two inches apart, the sign for a double shot.

"Here's the killer thing, guys," Julep is saying. "Here's the real sad part: I was still a virgin!"

There's more laughter and groaning and then somebody shouts, "I don't know about that one Jule."

The girl hands Will his bourbon and he raises it to Julep. "I say it's okay," he says. "I'm feeling bad for you, Jule."

It isn't clear why the game makes them feel better. The stories they tell are all ten times less awful than the stuff they see every day: guys parachuting into nests of ground gunners, planes blowing apart, pilots breaking their necks on ejection and floating to the ground like dead baby birds. In the game no one mentions the war; it's an unspoken rule. Somehow, there's something comforting in the thought of all the shitty stuff that happens back home as well. The war might well be a tragedy. But it isn't the only one.

The game is their ritual. They play every time someone goes down, whether he's clearly dead or just MIA. They play it even if there's entertainment that night, or journalists visiting the base, or desk jockeys from Saigon having dinner with the commander to rack up combat pay. The only time they lost a guy without playing was when some visitors came from Takhli. Takhli is a newer base than Korat, and an informal competition has grown up between them. Everyone keeps track of the stats: target hits, MiG kills, res-

cues. It makes the war more like a football game, something you could win or lose, then walk away from.

A small delegation came from Takhli to see how Korat's repair set-up worked. The Wild Weasels lost a guy that day. Weasels were Thuds—F105 fighter-bombers—altered to carry two guys and radar-seeking missiles. The missiles were equipped with a guidance system that honed in on the SAM site's radar. When they exploded, they took the whole site with them. The day's flight had nailed the site, but not before it got off a couple of SAMs. One of them hit its mark.

When the Takhli guys heard a pilot was downed they bought a round of drinks. Then the wing commander, Baz, bought a round, and then Julep Schneider did, because he was squadron leader of the Weasels. After that they all sat around until, one by one, they started to drift back to their hooches. Lying in bed that night, Will felt worse than he had since he arrived at Korat.

Goddamn Takhli pukes, he thought. *They don't know how to survive a war.*

Across from him, he could see a light burning in Rogoff's hooch. Guy was probably reading Latin poetry. He had walked home with Will that night. When they got near their hooches, he didn't say good night. Instead, he stood there for a second, shoving one foot back and forth on the dirt path, scraping a little trench.

"Vita humana est supplicium," he said. "Human life is punishment."

At the end of each mission, a pilot marks an x on his helmet. After 100, you go home. The x's can keep you together. They keep you going. When Will makes his x after each mission, he considers it a crossing-out. That one is done and gone, buried behind the black mark. It's not that he can forget. He just knows enough to keep moving forward. That can be like forgetting.

Only one mission regularly drags him back, and it's not even one of his own flights. It's the time he went on a Wild Weasel run.

The Weasels were looking for a one-seater to complete their flight. They were short one plane. For a week, SAMs had been coming from a new neck of the woods, and they had downed the Weasels' fourth plane.

"Yesterday's strike force pickled a load on what we thought was the site," Julep told Will. "But they're still coming hot and heavy. It's a Weasel job."

They told Will to hold his position and follow their lead. They flew in on the deck, fast and low. Will flew fourth, disoriented by being so close to the ground. Weasels flew low on purpose. Unlike bombing flights, they wanted to be seen. Their radar-seeking Shrike missiles couldn't zero in on the SAM site until the SAM site was zeroed in on them.

As they roared along at 600 miles an hour, Will started to enjoy seeing what the place really looked like. The mountains hunched under a lush, green blanket of trees, heavy from the constant rain. Winding dirt roads cut through the woods occasionally, but for the most part it looked almost uninhabited.

When they got closer to the target site, the land flattened out and became farmland. Occasionally Will thought he could see what looked like someone working the land, wading in a flat green field. They always zipped by too fast for him to see what they were doing. But suddenly he had a strange feeling of vertigo, as if he were watching someone else fly a 35 million dollar piece of equipment loaded with ordnance overhead. As if he were the guy on the ground, thinking about his crop, looking up in surprise as four impossibly fast killing machines zoomed ninety feet over his head. *Ain't no way.*

When they neared the previous day's target area the red launch light lit up on his control panel. They rolled right and dove in, following the missile's guidance.

In the last few seconds of the dive, he saw it. His right wing dipped and it appeared, not more than a thousand feet off target: a village, a circle of what used to be huts in the middle of a large field, flattened. They were still smoking.

He heard Julep screaming over the radio at him to fire his missile and somehow he pushed the button. The whole thing flashed by so quickly he could hardly remember pulling out again and following the others up to a safer altitude. He jinked right and left, as much because he wanted to see that village again as to avoid enemy fire. But it was too far back. Julep had two more sites he wanted to take out that day. Will didn't even know this part of the country well enough to say exactly where he'd been.

"Since it's November," Bear Mayer begins, "I'm telling a Thanksgiving story." Bear is a strapping Polish guy, probably 6'3", with a large frame and massive freckled hands. In his plane he looks crammed into the cockpit, a lapdog stuffed in a matron's purse. The Thai serving girls always stare at him with frank awe. Will figures they've never seen a man that large.

"It's the first Thanksgiving I'm married, and my wife is cooking for the whole family. She's real nervous about it too, because my mother has always done the turkey. At the last minute, she realizes she doesn't have any of that cranberry stuff, so she sends me to the store for a couple of cans."

Bear pauses and takes a few breaths. Will can see his barrel of a chest rising and falling. Bear is generally acknowledged to be the nicest guy on the base. As proof, someone always tells the story of his toad. Back in August he found a tiny toad in his hooch. Instead of stepping on it like a lot of guys would, he picked it up and moved it outside. The next day it was back. He moved it again. The third day it was looking at him as if begging him to understand. That's how he explained his decision to let it stay on. It was pleading with its eyes. He and the toad have lived in harmony ever since.

"He's just a little guy," Bear always says when someone starts teasing him about his pet. "He don't take up a whole lot of space."

Will tunes out Bear's Thanksgiving story as he racks his own brain for something to tell. It's an odd feeling, sifting through one's past looking for shreds of pathos. It makes him feel sullied, slightly obscene. For some reason an image of his father keeps taking shape in his head, his father standing alone in the west cornfield.

"Meanwhile, unbeknownst to me, my wife's brother has wrapped his car around a telephone pole." Will doesn't know if Bear has gotten himself home with the cranberries or not. He's lost the thread. He settles on telling a slightly exaggerated story about how his high school girlfriend dumped him. He tries to think of the girl's name. Frieda? Flora? It was something with an F.

"So there's the turkey, burnt to a crisp, my wife in our bedroom in hysterics, and I'm standing there with cranberry all down my front." Will doesn't know how the story got to its ending, but the others seem to like it.

"Bear, man," Baz says, getting up and throwing his arms around Bear's bulky form. "You got my vote for sure."

They all make mistakes. They've bombed the wrong bridge, missed the target, come in too fast or too slow and had to abort. There's always unintended damage. There are even stories about guys who bomb civilians on purpose. They get to their coordinates and can't find the intended target, or get locked out by the weather, so they find a village and pickle the bombs there instead. *Fraggin' villes*, they call it. Will has always tried to believe it's a myth. But even if no one ever frags villes, accidents are bound to happen. In the rush of battle everybody has the same feeling: get the thing done and get out. *Hit my smoke* is the motto. There's no time to think about whether the first guy dropped his bombs with total accuracy, whether the wing commander calculated the coordinates right, whether Intel chose a valid target in the first place. The nature of the game is imprecise.

Still, the vision of the bombed-out village haunts Will. At night he lies on his bed and stares at the ceiling. The roof is a slab of corrugated plastic with a swirling pattern. In one place the swirls are irregular, as if they melted once, and he has come to see the flaw as the village. He still has no idea what he's seeing. For all he knows, it could be his handiwork haunting him, the results of his run the day before. He can't remember where they were that day, in Hanoi or blasting the staging area just north of the 17th parallel. Even the day of the Weasel run he couldn't remember, and he finds that suspicious, as if he's hiding something from himself.

Maybe it was a civilian village and they bombed it. Then again, maybe it was a military supply camp. It could have been no village at all, but a SAM site disguised as a village. That isn't unknown. Maybe they stopped it from downing even more guys. Maybe they killed old men and babies. Will stares at the ceiling and rearranges the village huts; now it's a group of farms; now it's a Vietcong outpost, deadly and still. He imagines himself on the ground, a farmer, looking up at the sky and seeing planes coming to flatten his fields, his family. He imagines running into the hut. There's a missile launcher hidden beneath the brush roof. He sees himself listening for the planes as they come, firing the missiles to take them down. He sees himself falling from the sky.

The day they lose Rogoff, Will wins *Ad Misericordia*. He was flying as Rogoff's wing man. They'd just pickled a load when Rogoff came up in Will's headset, sounding cool as ever.

"Shit, my hydraulics are fluctuating. Come in and look me over, will you, see if there's anything leaking out."

Without hydraulics, the Thud is a brick. Will got as close as he could. He was twenty feet to Rogoff's right, scanning the other plane for fluid when the SAM hit it from behind. There was no time for Rogoff to eject. His whole plane burst into flame as if it had been waiting to do so. Just before he dove right to avoid the fireball, Will saw Rogoff inside. His helmet was shaking back and forth. It didn't look like terror, but like surprise. Then the black smoke rolled over them all.

"I'm in second grade," Will tells the guys. "I went to a one-room schoolhouse. All the kids went for lunch and recess at the same time." He doesn't feel his usual reluctance. For once he hasn't racked his brains for a story. The memory flooded into his head, complete, while he was flying back from the mission. It filled him with a sudden sense of outrage and sadness and loss. Strangely, he wants to tell it.

"I was on the swings when the teacher rang the bell for recess to end. I jumped off my swing at the top of the arc."

"Had you qualified for ejection-seat yet?" someone asks, and there's a rustle of laughter. Will grins, but continues. The story is pressing against him like a river, sweeping him along with its current.

"I fell straight down like a stone. The ground was hard because it wasn't raining that summer. It was one of the worst droughts I ever saw. All the crops were dying. Hitting that ground was like hitting a rock. I put my arms out to break my fall and I broke them. Both arms." He pauses while the others absorb this. He picks up his drink and feels a rush of pity for that person, his little boy self, lying like a question mark on the ground. He couldn't move his fingers.

"The bell was ringing, and everybody else—all the other kids—they just ran inside." He's tumbling towards the end of the story. The last sentence is like waterfall, and he slips over it. "I lay there on the ground," he says, "for fifteen minutes, until the teacher finally noticed I was gone."

There's silence. Will takes a deep breath. He clenches his teeth together, just as he did when he was eight, sure that if he opened them, something unbidden would come bursting forth. An animal

howl or a girlish yelp of pain. His fellow pilots look at him. A burst of applause breaks the spell.

"You got it Will!" Baz shouts.

"Call the barkeep," Julep says. "You win that one for sure."

The war's secret is randomness. Nothing but chance decrees whose plane is in front of the SAM, who gets it in the belly with flak, who on the ground gets pounded while tending his rice, who survives to man his guns for another day. Training, talent, discipline—they all matter, but in the end it's about being in the wrong place at the wrong time. And yet the pilots still watch every film intently, analyze the details of each loss, hoping to see what went wrong. He jinked left when he should have jinked right, sped up when he should have slowed down. I can avoid that mistake.

At the same time they cling to the idea of luck, filling their pockets with saints' faces, lucky pennies, four leaf clovers. Some guys won't go up without a special shirt or shoes, no matter how threadbare they become. Everyone has a lucky charm. Will has an Indian arrowhead he found plowing his father's field when he was thirteen. He took it to mean there was always hope for escape, even if you were buried under Michigan earth for more than a hundred years. He has spent a lot of time wondering what the guy was shooting at: a deer? a rabbit? another Indian?

The night he wins *Ad Misericordia*, Will walks home to his hooch. The night is hot and humid, as always. He takes off his boots and shrugs out of his flight suit. He lies down on his bed and stares at the village on the ceiling.

"Human life is punishment," he says out loud. The words hang in the heavy air. They aren't quite right. He turns his head and looks at the picture of his daughter. From his prone position he can see the picture and the clock, but not the door. It's eleven p.m. In six hours he'll be up for the morning briefing, where they find out where they'll be going that day. He lies perfectly still, so as not to disturb the moment. There's one more x on his helmet. He's made it through one more day.